REVERSED EKPHRASIS AND THE CONVERSION OF LITERARY SOURCE TEXTS INTO VISUAL ART TARGET TEXTS

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Abstract:When attempting at analysing the manner a literary source text is turned into a visual art target text, through reversed ekphrasis, the most important element to focus upon is the perception of the conversion process as an achievement, which is entitled to its own identity and which, although being originated in the literary source text, develops along its innate laws.

Accordingly, while focusing on how literary texts are conversed by painters, with a view to be transferred from one medium to the other, it is necessary not to leave aside the fact that the target visual texts, having emerged through reversed ekphrasis, require to be dealt upon both in terms of their artistic excellence and in terms of their condition as transpositions of literary source texts.

Keywords: reversed ekphrasis, literary source text, visual art target text, conversion, pictoriality.

Reversed ekphrasis develops according to a threefold-stage process that comprises: the linear reading of the source text, empowering the painter to grasp its denotative and connotative meaning, the conversion of the literary source text, which implies handling operations of the source text's time and space and results in the configuration of the target text; in my opinion, conversion involves two levels of perception, which I call reframing, respectively, destabilization, and which are related to the recognizable character of the source text within the target text; and, finally, the substantiation of the conversion, which is compulsorily accompanied by the particular enterprise of attributing pictoriality to the target text, through references regarding the stylistic identity of the visual target text, its acknowledgement as an artistic product, and, ultimately, its testifying of a successful process of reversed ekphrasis.

The reading of the literary source text is a deliberate, mental and cognitive operation assumed by the painter who may (most often, in biographic references, letters, diaries, etc.) or may not offer hints upon it. This stage is the one that settles the foundations of the entire process of reversed ekphrasis, owing to the fact that it permits the painters to outline a prior general design of both the common grounds and the conceptual and structural differences between the source texts and the target texts they are going to produce.

The second stage of the process of reversed ekphrasis, conversion, develops along two levels, each of them relying on the degree according to which the literary source text is recognizable within the visual target text. I shall further call the first level reframing and the second one destabilisation, asserting that, while in the case of reframing, the source text can still be identified easily enough by the viewer, in the case of destabilisation, either the source text becomes hardly recognizable within the target text or the target visual text refers to moments or scenes which are not directly presented by the literary source text.

I should also stress the fact that, although it is important to throw light on the literary source involved in a reversed ekphrasis, owing to its being the ground itself of such a process and to its pointing to the painting's intertextuality, the literary source may also determine a dual perception in its viewers: it is either regarded as significant or as meaningless, depending on whether the viewers have previously established an encounter with the literary source or not. Moreover, the viewers' acceptance of being handled by the author of the conversion and

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their final acceptance of the visual target text depends more on the painterly achievement than on the literary source text.

Though sometimes it is quite difficult to trace the delineation between reframingand destabilization, I consider that it is always important to stress that, irrespective of the two levels of the ekphrastic process, the visual target text is, in fact, a new work of art. Despite defining reversed ekphrasis in terms of interpretation or of the specificity of the visual medium that operates changes of style, method and materials, a visual target text should finally relate to the viewer, owing to its inner artistic characteristics that distinguish it from non-artistic works. And, in proceeding like this, the outcome of a reversed ekphrasis processalways stands as equal to the source text.

The third stage of reversed ekphrasis processes is the substantiation of the source text's conversion, involving the level of the discourse and the typology of the signs (as it materializes a shift from the symbolic signs, characteristic for the literary source text, to the iconic signs, intrinsic to the visual target text), as well as the visual elements that make perceptible the temporal and spatial planning of the target text, the rendering of the characters and details, capable of providing the relevance of the target text both as a new work of art and as a conversion of the literary source having successfully performed changes in its form, character, and function.

As the entire process of reversed ekphrasis involves and relies on the literariness of the source text and the pictoriality of the target text, I consider that infusing the resulting iconic sign with pictoriality cannot be viewed as a separate stage of the process, owing to the fact that such a quality is initiated at the moment the visual artist engages in converting the source text: the very end of the whole process of painting, as well as the goal of the artist, is the making of a work of art,which determines its being obstinately pursued from the first brushes painted on the canvas until the final strokes that put an end to the picture.

The fact that theorists, philosophers, and critics had long ago started to look for meaningful characteristics capable of making the difference between the verbal arts and the visual arts, resulted in twofold analyses of the media under discussion: on the one hand, the approach that emphasizes the dissimilarities existing between the word art and painting and that broadly relies upon the manner words, respectively images are used; on the other hand, the trend, which underlines the common features the two realms possibly share and which primarily relate to the historical and cultural background.

Throughout history, the continual competition between the two media and their permanent strife for supremacy have determined the attaching of certain characteristics to each medium, which are supposed to represent the most pertinent elements capable of thoroughly defining the two fields: while word art is largely attributed the capacity of conveying concepts and symbols and appropriates the category of time, painting appears to rely on representation and perception and to be attached to the category of space. In the case of the paintings that are the result of the process of reversed ekphrasis, the visual and spatial elements constructing their particular patterns, which have their origins in the literary sources having operated as stimuli for conversions, may also be understood as transformers of symbolic signs into iconic signs.

Having previously asserted that the outcome of a reversed ekphrasis process should be perceived as a new work of art, displaying its own characteristics that separate it from non-artistic productions, it is also worth stressing that, contrary to a still widely employed idea, reversed ekphrasis transpositions are not to be regarded as target visual texts inferior to their literary source texts. The setting forth of the particularities that range the target text into the realm of the visual art should occur concomitantly with the analysis of the reversed ekphrasis process, and focus upon the similar perspectives having allowed the ranking of the source text within the word arts. Although, quite frequently, such transfers, from one media to another, cease to be regarded according to their interconnections and come to be perceived as

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independent works of art, nonetheless, an insight into the specific medium of each of the two texts is definitely required.

In order to develop my considerations upon the two levels of conversion, namely reframing and destabilization, which I consider characteristic for the second stage of reversed ekphrasis processes, I would bring into discussion a series of concepts approaching storytelling, discourse, and signs.

In the opinion of Seymour Chatman (1990, 109-11), although narrative texts "share" the essential characteristic of story, comprising several events that are interconnected, stories may be differently "shared", either through "telling" or through "showing". While analysing reframing and destabilization, it is important to take into consideration the level of the story, which establishes connections between the literary source text and the visual target text, and which also determines differences between the two texts.

Meanwhile, the specific types of signs each of the two media resorts to, with a view of displaying the story, characterize texts at the level of discourse: while texts relying on words employ symbolic signs, texts relying on images, generally, make use of iconic signs. The previously mentioned separation between the signs operating in the medium of the literary art and those specific to the art of painting also emphasizes the different manner of rendering details: literature treats details by nominating them individually and successively, whereas painting frequently shows a large amount of details shared simultaneously. (Chatman, 1990: 115)

As certain theoretical approaches have set forth (Porter Abbott, 2002: 109-10), the specificity of the signs the two media rely on also determines differences in the sharing andperception of the characters: if, in literature, characters usually are not fully described and the readers are given but a few clues allowing them to forge a mental image of the characters, which, nonetheless, retains its adaptability throughout the story telling, in the case of paintings, characters are perceived by the viewers the very moment they meet the image, which results in a sort of a fixed mental designing to be attached to the characters. Despite the emphasis on such delineations, I consider that the characters in the paintings transposing literary source texts through reversed ekphrasis are far from rigid: they acquire a complementary extensibility determined both by their being a part of the conversion process (which, most often, accounts for their literary flexibility), and by the virtually limitless interpretative 'readings' operated by the viewers.

While having asserted that the target visual text revealed by reversed ekphrasis is to be perceived as a new work of art entitled to its own artistic features, I also consider necessary to connect this observation with the viewers' perception of the image accordingly resulted. In the case when viewers have already known the literary source texts, they cannot avoid recognizing the elements that are shared both by the source text and by the ekphrastic transposition; further, their favourable or hostile perception of the target visual text appears to be closely influenced by their previous knowledge of the literary source and all deviation from what has already been acquired in terms of literary knowledge may be judged as inappropriate.

Nonetheless, such knowledge becomes of lesser importance when the visual text coming out through a reversed ekphrasis transposition is to be analyzed with a view to be ranged among the category of works of art. It may be then inferred that possessing data upon the source text does not imply an objective evaluation of the target text; on the contrary, most often, a fracture of one's expectations occurs, in the case when the reframing or the destabilization levels of the process of reversed ekphrasis operate more or less extended deviations from the literary text.

As far as reversed ekphrastic processes are concerned, and in accordance with the claims above, let's pinpoint that, the moment target texts become regarded as equal to the source

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texts, they cease to be judged according to the extent to which they observe or not the status of being mere translations of a previously figured reality, supposed to render faithfully the content of their literary counterparts. Subsumed under the category of texts, both works of art, which represent the equivalent poles of the reversed ekphrastic process, display a full presence, although they are shaped by definite and, most often, different historical backgrounds that account for their peculiar characteristics.

I should mention, with these in view, Robert Stam's (2005: 10) opinions on a similar type of transposition that develops from a literary source text towards a mixed medium text, namely film adaptations: "… a text is an event, whose indeterminacies are completed and actualized in the reading (or spectating)." According to Stam, certain theoretical approaches (reception theory, for example) appear to erode "the notion of a semantic core, a nucleus of meaning, ascribable to novels, which adaptations are presumed to 'capture' or 'betray', and thus clear space for the idea of adaptation as supplementing the gaps of the literary text. Furthermore, contemporary theory assumes that texts do not know themselves, and therefore seeks out the unsaid (the non-dit) of texts. Adaptations, in this sense, might be seen as filling in the lacunae of the source novels, calling attention to their structuring absences. This 'filling' is especially common in adaptations of long-consecrated texts, …, where the passage of time has made readers/ adapters skeptical about the novel's basic premises and assumptions."

Consequently, reversed-ekphrasis conversions, like adaptations, assumed to have their own identity, equal to that of their literary source texts, not only complete a gap, but operate a double action: they may expand the meaningof the literary sources, either through extracting a theme or through focusing upon a particular moment or a character from the narrative, which, ultimately, widens or makes more specific an idea in the source text, and they may also attach new meanings, un-asserted by the literary source text.

Although the artistic value of a target text should not depend on the degree of accuracy, according to which the literary source text has been transposed into the visual medium, nonetheless the target text establishes a special connection with its source; this connection, which develops along two levels, reframing and destabilization, requires the reader to engage with the painting through the mediation of the literary text in an attempt at grasping both the meanings implied by the source texts and the expanded or newly attached meanings provided by the target texts.

The painters themselves, through their reversed ekphrastic processes, provide the viewers with the ground that might determine them to reflect upon the connections existing between the literary and the visual art productions. By leaving certain issues unsettled in their paintings or by providing certain details, which are not displayed by their source text, the artists appear to invite their audience to explore the challenging relation between literature and visual art.

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